

TEACHING ESSAY WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: RESULTS OF TEACHERS' SURVEY IN LATVIA

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Abstract. *Essay writing in foreign language is crucial for a career of professionals as well as personal development. Teaching essay writing in a foreign language is an efficient way to improve students' skills in essay writing in a foreign language. The aim of the present paper is to analyse teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language in secondary schools in Latvia. The evaluation study was carried out in Latvia in March 2024. Five respondents took part in the survey questionnaire. The collected data was processed via frequency of answer and ranking. Teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language has been positively evaluated. Implications for teachers have been presented. Focus of further work has been reflected. The novelty of this work is shown in implications for the organisation of teaching essay writing in a foreign language.*
Keywords: *essay writing, foreign language, frequency of answer, ranking, teaching essay writing, teachers, survey questionnaire.*

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Introduction

Essay writing has always been relevant in an academic environment, and the skills that students acquire through essay writing learning have an impact on students' future lives after graduation (Bikova & Zascerinska, 2025). Mastering essay writing allows students to evaluate their personal opinions on specific issues and to demonstrate and deepen their knowledge on a particular topic. Essay writing develops students' research skills, critical and communication skills (Imaniah, 2022), that are in a high demand in the modern world of information technology. Today's life requires people to be open to new things, be able to communicate using information communication technology and the Internet, be able to type text and write messages, as well as critically analyse different situations and quickly find appropriate solutions. Therefore, it is very important to teach essay writing already in basic school in order to prepare students for further academic tasks or job tasks in professional life.

Essay is the most important tool of communication, as it helps students to formulate, explain and express their thoughts and ideas, thus developing students' communication skills with the world and other people.

Since one of the main purposes of essay is to express opinion through argumentation, students must appeal to various literary sources in order to find ideas and facts that will support their argument. Thus, the process of essay writing provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and expands that knowledge regarding a specific topic. Therefore, teachers play the key role in organizing the process of essay writing (Engeness, 2018).

However, the previous research mostly focuses on students' experience in essay writing (Izmaylova, 2019).

The aim of the present paper is to analyse teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language in secondary schools in Latvia.

The novelty of this work is shown in implications for the organisation of teaching essay writing in a foreign language.

Research Methodology

The empirical study was enabled by the research question: What is teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language?

The purposes of the empirical study were to analyse teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language.

Evaluation study was employed in this work (Zaščerinska, 2010). The target of this evaluation study is to get teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language evaluated. The evaluation scale includes three levels:

- Positive evaluation,
- Neutral evaluation, and
- Negative evaluation.

The empirical study was carried out in Latvia in March 2024.

The composition of the study sample was based on the principles of sample appropriateness, sufficiency and confidence (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2015). The criterion for teachers' inclusion in the sample included that teachers' previous teaching experience in 8th grade despite that they currently work in other grades than 8th grade. Another inclusion criteria was teachers' experience of teaching essay writing in other grades than 8th grade as they are regarded as the preparation for essay writing in the Final English exam in the 9th grade. The method for sample composition was chosen as information-oriented sample. Information-oriented sampling includes respondents who can provide a valuable information on the research topic (Ahrens et.al., 2021). The sample was composed of five English teachers in secondary schools in Latvia. A special attention was paid to teachers who worked with eight grade students as eighth grade students were in the preparation stage for the final exam in English. Final English exam takes place when students reach ninth grade.

Table 1 shows the results of teachers' responses to the question about the grade levels in which they teach.

Table 1 Grades in which the respondents work at (the authors)

Respondent	Grade level the teacher works at
Respondent 1	7th
Respondent 2	5th Grade
Respondent 3	8th Grade and engineering students at university
Respondent 4	5th Grade
Respondent 5	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th

Source: The authors.

$n=5$

The results of the survey questionnaire demonstrate that English teachers work with students of different grade levels. Only two teachers have experience in working with the students from the eighth grade.

Figure 1 reveals the number of years during which respondents have been teaching English. As Figure 1 discloses the most of the respondents have between 1-15 years of teaching experience.

The study was based on the survey questionnaire (Zascerinska, Aleksejeva, Zascerinskis, Gukovica, & Aleksejeva, 2020). To recognize opinions on necessary changes - the survey was aimed to share experiences in teaching essay writing among teachers, as well as to identify ideas on possible changes in teaching essay writing techniques to improve essay writing results among students. The survey questionnaire contained 13 questions of open and closed types, with the ability to select suggested answers. The questionnaire was prepared and distributed to five English teachers in secondary schools in Latvia to collect data about knowledge, experience and opinions of teachers on the topic of developing essay writing techniques for eighth graders in English lessons.

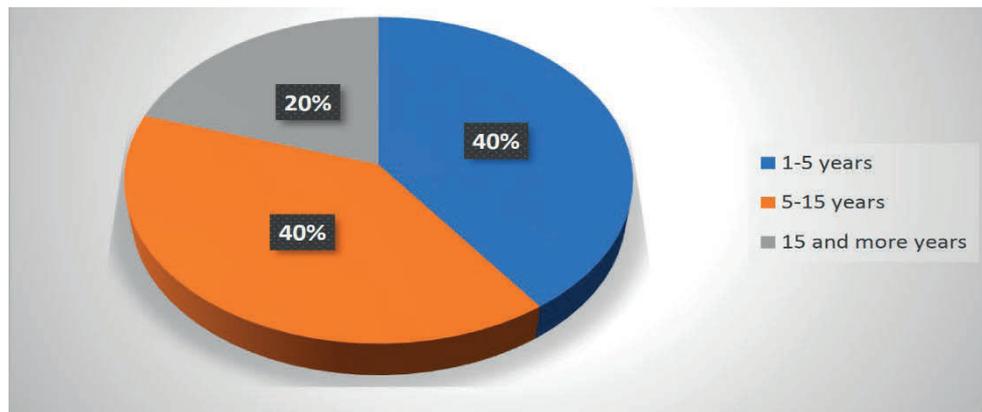


Figure 1 Percentage of the number of years respondents devoted to teaching (the authors)

The methods of data analysis are frequency of answer and ranking (Ahrens & Zascerinska, 2020).

Results

The survey questionnaire helped collect data on different aspects of teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language.

Table 2 shows the curriculum and resources respondents use to teach essay writing.

Table 2 Curriculum and resources for teaching essay writing (the authors)

Respondent	What curriculum or resources do you primarily use for essay writing instruction? (e.g., textbooks, online tools, literary examples)
Respondent 1	Textbooks, pamphlets and travel agency information.
Respondent 2	Textbooks and online tools for example: testenglish.com
Respondent 3	Online tools and textbooks
Respondent 4	Textbooks, grammar textbooks, online tools, literary examples
Respondent 5	Online resources

Source: The authors.

$n=5$

Table 3 reflects the frequency and ranking of answer about curriculum and resources respondents use to teach essay writing.

Table 3 Frequency and ranking of curriculum and resources respondents use to teach essay writing (the authors)

Resource	Frequency of answer	Ranking
Textbook	4	1
Grammar textbook	1	3
Online tools	3	2
Online resources	1	3
Teaching book	1	3
Pamphlets	1	3
Travel agency information	1	3
Literary examples	1	3

Source: The authors.

n=8

Table 3 highlights that textbooks and online tools are the most used by teachers for teaching essay writing.

Figure 2 demonstrates the length of the essay teachers assign students to write.

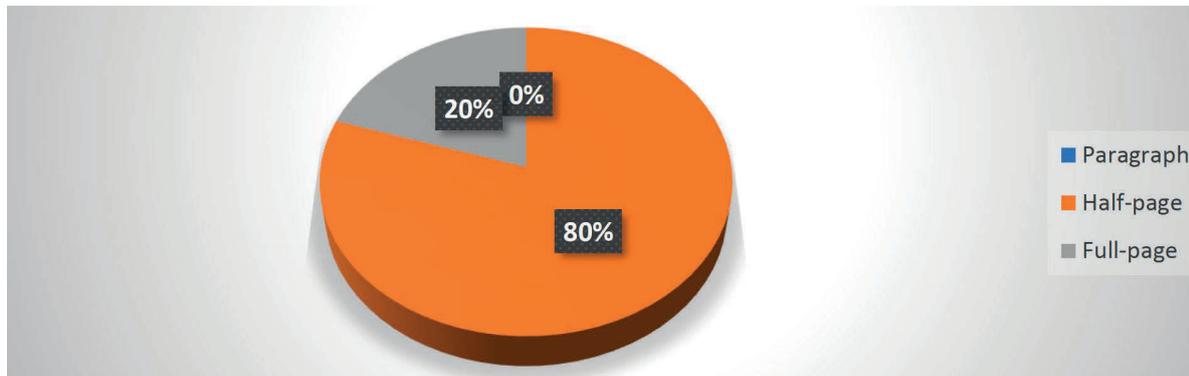


Figure 2 Percentage of the number of years respondents devoted to teaching (the authors)

Figure 2 emphasized that most often, teachers ask students to write a half-page essay, and less often a full page.

Table 4 displays the types of essays teachers most often assign to students. Ranking determines the importance of the answer option. The highest rank is awarded to the most significant answer option. Points are the sum of all ranking selected by the respondents for the respective answer option. The most important answer option is the one with the lowest score. The least important answer is the one with the highest score.

Table 4 The types of essays that teachers most often assign to students (the authors)

Essay type	Ranking	Points
Narrative	1	8
Persuasive	2	12
Compare & Contrast	3	14
Expository	4	16
Other	5	25

Source: The authors.

n=5

Table 5 demonstrates the strategies that teachers find most effective for helping students to develop strong thesis statements and supporting arguments.

Table 5 Effective strategies for teaching students to develop strong thesis statements and supporting arguments (the authors)

Respondent	What strategies do you find most effective in helping students develop strong thesis statements and supporting arguments?
Respondent 1	Brainstorming and writing one sentence
Respondent 2	Brainstorm and small debate sessions where students give their opinions about the topic
Respondent 3	Clear structure of the text to be developed
Respondent 4	Successive relearning
Respondent 5	Research, mind map

Source: The authors.
n=5

Table 5 identifies that brainstorming appears to be the most effective for helping students to develop strong thesis statements and supporting arguments.

Figure 3 reflects the description of the structure of essay writing instruction. By “Other answers”, writing a draft as a homework and during the lesson checking mistakes was presented. Figure 3 determines brainstorming, peer review sessions, and revision and editing instruction to be of the most use in teaching essay writing.

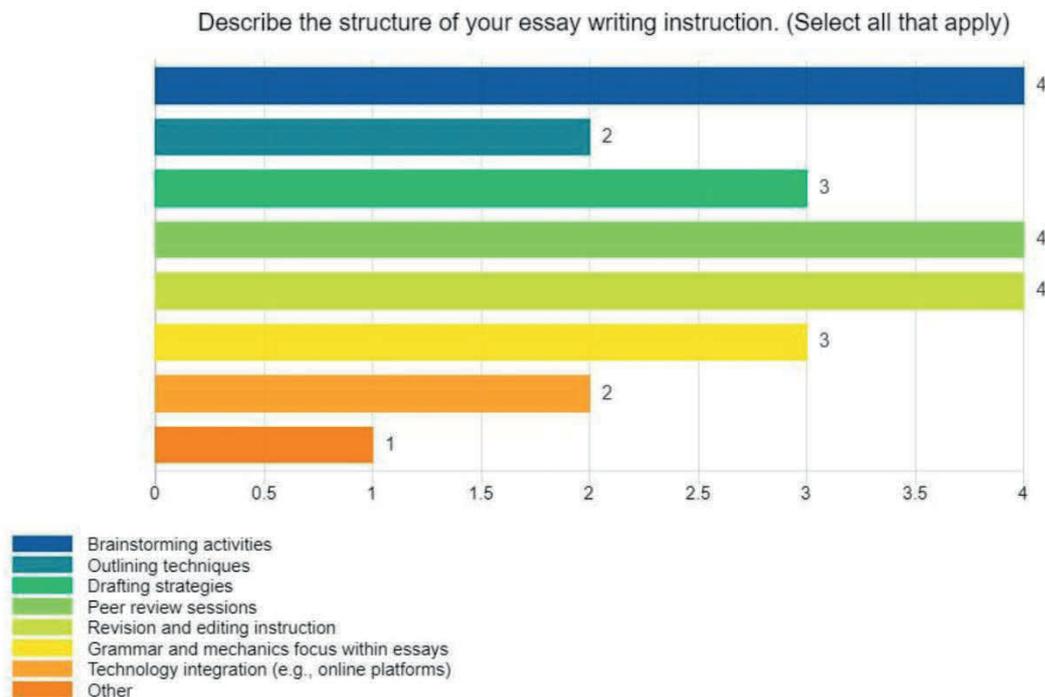


Figure 3 Activities that constitute essay writing instruction (the authors)

Figure 4 shows the biggest challenges teachers face in teaching essay writing.

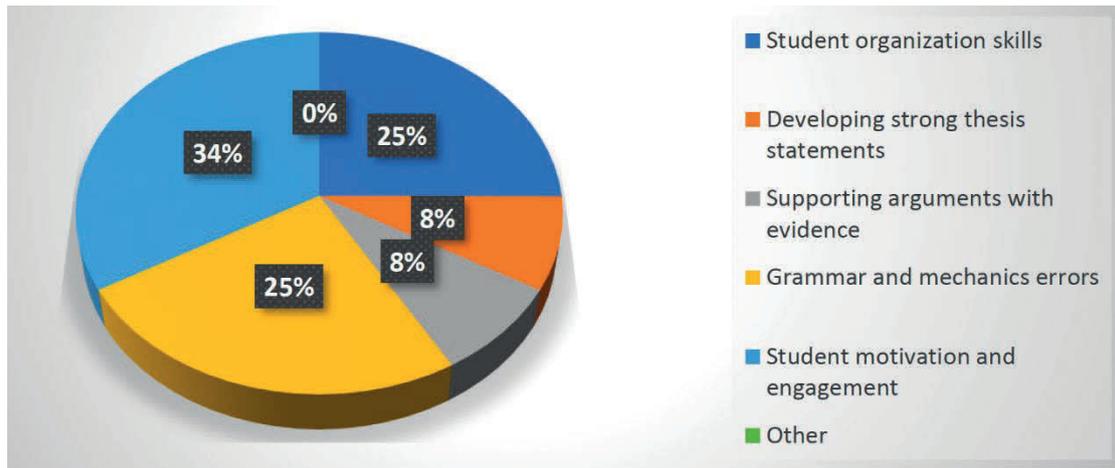


Figure 4 Challenges in teaching essay writing to eighth graders (the authors)

As shown in Figure 4, teachers report that the biggest challenge in teaching essay writing to eighth graders is motivating and engaging students in the learning process. Also, several teachers noted that students had problems with essay organization and grammar, and two teachers noticed that students had problems developing supporting arguments for essays.

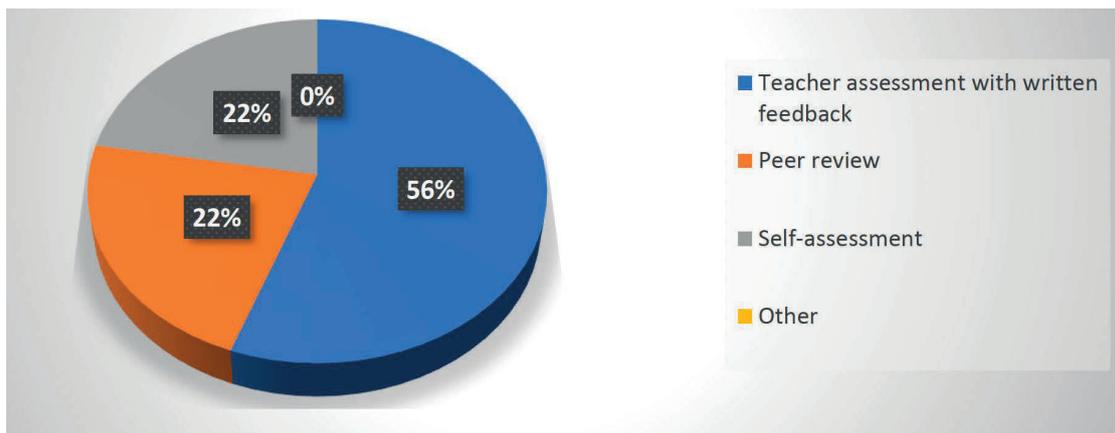


Figure 5 Methods for assessing student essays (the authors)

As seen in Figure 5, most often, teachers prefer to evaluate students independently, and only a few teachers noted that they also provide the opportunity to evaluate essays by peers or allow students to evaluate themselves individually.

Figure 6 shows the feedback methods teachers most commonly use to improve students' essay writing performance.

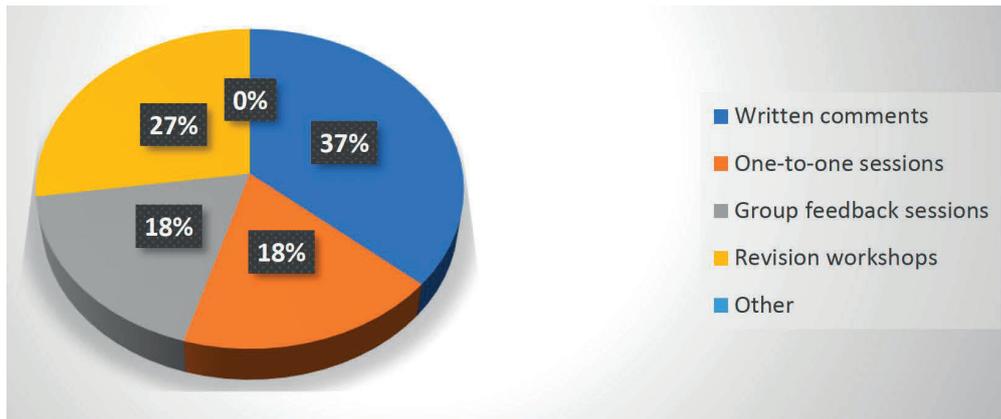


Figure 6 *Methods to provide essay writing feedback to students (the authors)*

As defined in Figure 6, most teachers indicate that they prefer to provide written feedback (comments) on students' essays or to make revision sessions, while group assessment sessions or one-to-one sessions are less popular among teachers.

Table 6 displays useful resources that help teachers to improve essay writing teaching instruction for eighth graders.

Table 6 *Useful resources and professional development for improving essay writing instruction (the authors)*

Respondent	What kind of professional development or resources would be most helpful to you in improving your essay writing instruction?
Respondent 1	Textbooks or analysing the text
Respondent 2	More practice in writing
Respondent 3	Professional development courses connected with writing skills; Project participation
Respondent 4	Use of Artificial Intelligence such as Quillbot; Plagium; Turnitin; Galaxy; Wisio.app
Respondent 5	Developed methodological materials

Source: The authors.
n=5

To improve essay writing skills, teachers recommend to use methodological materials and text analysis, practice more writing, use various platforms (for example, Quillbot, Plagium, Turnitin, and others), participating in projects, participate in professional development courses related to writing skills, as well as compile various essays and analyze them as presented in Table 6.

Table 7 shows respondents' suggestions for engaging students in the essay writing process and also provides recommendations for making essay writing instruction relevant to students.

Table 7 Suggestions for improving students' engagement in essay writing teaching process (the authors)

Respondent	Do you have any suggestions for how to make essay writing more engaging and relevant for eighth graders?
Respondent 1	Pictures, pamphlets
Respondent 2	Use topics that are interesting to students. Relevant topics for nowadays or something about the future
Respondent 3	To show the use of writing in real life conditions and professional environment to the learners
Respondent 4	It is important to consider contemporary topics and issues that teenagers face in their daily lives. Books containing elements of adventure, fantasy, science fiction, or drama may be of particular interest to teen audiences. Young heroes and their aspirations, problems of first love, finding their place in the world, dealing with conflicts - all these topics resonate in the hearts of teenagers
Respondent 5	Choose topic that they are interested in (ask them)

Source: The authors.

n=5

To make essay writing more interesting and relevant for students, teachers advise using pictures, brochures, choosing topics that are relevant to students today or about the future, demonstrating to students the use of writing in a real life/professional environment, considering topics that teenagers are exposed to in everyday life (for example, finding their place in the world, first love problems, conflict resolution, etc.).

Table 8 displays additional teacher insights on the topic of teaching essay writing to eighth graders.

Table 8 Additional comments from teachers on teaching essay writing to students (the authors)

Respondent	Are there any other comments or insights you would like to share regarding the teaching of essay writing at this grade level?
Respondent 1	No
Respondent 2	Do not be afraid of practicing writing skills more often. Use relevant topics. Let them evaluate each other (give comments, ideas)
Respondent 3	Writing is a very important skill in everyone's life. It should be practised thoroughly
Respondent 4	Commented reading; analysis of a literary text (genre, composition, meaning of the title, features of the narrative style, syntactic organization, lexical features, associative moves, etc.); episode analysis; analysis of visual media; analysis of various essay samples (opinion, argumentative, descriptive, etc.); comparison of essays on the same topic written by different authors
Respondent 5	Not at this point in the experience of teaching

Source: The authors.

n=5

Teachers believe that writing is one of the most important life skills as disclosed in Table 8, so this skill needs to be carefully practiced with students.

The empirical study allows finding out that the respondents' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language can be positively evaluated. The respondents use a range of diverse resources, methods and materials for organizing their teaching. They enhance their

teaching experience by learning how to use different online tools, providing their written feedback (comments) on students' essays or making revision sessions.

Discussion

The importance of writing essays in a foreign language has been considered by the scientific community. Writing has the greatest potential for explaining one's position (Quintero, 2018). Writing proficiently in a global language or two gives every professional an added advantage (Raxmanova, 2023) as today experts with a high level of proficiency in a foreign language are considered in demand in the labour market (Bessonova, Kirillova, & Tarabarina, 2020). Foreign language writing is recognised as individual's developmental process (Eryilmaz & Yesilyurt, 2020). Individual's writing ability in a foreign language affects his/her writing ability in mother tongue (Mehrabi, 2014).

The present research supports the assumption that teachers are the key players in organizing the process of essay writing expressed by Engeness (2018). Therefore, teachers' professional activities may impact the effectiveness of the use of the classroom time for improving students' essay writing skills. The study shows that teachers' experience in organizing the process of essay writing in other grades than the 8th grade is useful to prepare students for essay writing in the Final English Exam in the 9th grade. For the increase of teachers' professionalism in organizing the process of essay writing in the classroom, teachers' continuous professional development training is crucial. Training on the organization of the process of essay writing should encompass teachers' skills to analyse their own performance, to identify challenges and opportunities as well as their use.

Teaching essay writing in a foreign language must be planned (Quintero, 2018; Izmaylova, 2019). It cannot be left in the hands of students (Quintero, 2018). Our study reveals challenges met by teachers when teaching essay writing in comparison to research on writing difficulties in essay writing from students' perspectives carried out by Bulqiyah, Mahbub, & Nugraheni (2021).

Preparation technique, based on four stages of text production: task orientation, text planning, text writing, and text self-editing, for writing essays is an effective means to improve students' skills in writing essays in a foreign language before exam (Bessonova, Kirillova, & Tarabarina, 2020). It should be noted that the target group of the present study was English teachers for eight grade students who are in the stage of preparation for essay writing as part of their final exam in English in Grade 9.

In comparison to essay writing in mother tongue, essay writing requires students to learn punctuation twice in both mother tongue and English (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2024).

Interesting is the finding that if a student knows the rules of grammar, he/she follows the rules of orthography and punctuation in both the language exam and other subject written exam, e.g. history (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2024).

We find that teaching essay writing in a foreign language has to encompass students' mother tongue due to the established positive relationship between students' mother tongue and foreign language: both languages impact each other enrichment. Moreover, better students' use of language means better students' knowledge of other school subjects.

Despite researchers' finding that literary reading works help EFL students improve their writing skills (Ghafar & Mohamedamin, 2022), textbook and online tools are preferred by English teachers who took part in the present empirical study. Our empirical research results related to the use of online tools for teaching essay writing in a foreign language are in accordance with the scientific developments proposed by other researchers, e.g. Bilyalova, Vasilyeva, Islamova, & Akhmetshina (2019), Ahmad, Mukhaiyar, & Atmazaki, 2022. However, the use of textbook for teaching essay writing in English classes has not attracted a

lot of attention from researchers. In comparison to Latvia English teachers prefer to use authentic materials as video and audio recordings, etc., e.g. El Sulukiyyah & Aisyah, 2019.

In regard to the length of essay writing, our study proposes a half page for 8th grade students. Other researchers imply time period, for example 30 or minutes by the length of essay writing, e.g. Fleckenstein, Meyer, Jansen, Keller, & Köller (2020).

We find it interesting that types of essay writing relevant to school students are not paid appropriate attention by the scientific community. When types of essay writing are discussed in scientific publications, they refer to the university level.

The results of our study of challenges teachers experience in teaching essay writing show similarities when refer to students' motivation and organizational skills, e.g. Enderwati, Anwar, & Maruf, 2023.

Our study results coincide with the findings of other researchers that teachers have to provide their students with proper feedback on their writings (Klimova, 2013).

Implications for teaching essay writing in a foreign language prescribe that teaching essay writing in a foreign language has to be carefully planned and organized. Preparation of teaching essay writing in a foreign language needs to ascertain the specific steps to make the process of learning essay writing ease and attractive for students. Together with the development of Information and communication technologies, the process of teaching essay writing in a foreign language has to integrate the leverage of online tools.

Conclusions

The results of our research allow concluding that essay writing in a foreign language is of high demand in the labour market.

Teachers' experience in teaching essay writing in a foreign language in Latvia is found to be positive. Teachers analyse their teaching, are able to identify challenges in their teaching and solutions to improve their teaching.

The empirical study is characterised by several limitations. A limitation is the participation of only five teachers in the survey questionnaire. Another limitation is that the respondents represented only one level of education, namely secondary schools. The limitation is also that the respondents of only one country took part in the survey questionnaire.

Further research proposes to extend the country of origin of respondents and increase their number. Engagement of teachers who work at different educational levels is intended as well. A detailed study of challenges, teachers face, when teaching essay writing in a foreign language will be carried out, too. Results of this study will be compared with results obtained by other researchers.

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